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UDAC 86-017

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

THROUGH: Deputy Director of Central Intelligence
Director, Intelligence Community Staff
Deputy Director, Intelligence Community Staff
Director, CCISCMS

FROM: [redacted] 25X1
Chief, Unauthorized Disclosures Analysis Center

SUBJECT: Media Use of Satellites (Wall St. Journal - 2 July 86)

Attached, for your information, is a Wall Street Journal story describing possible future use of commercial surveillance satellites by the news media. It predicts serious conflicts between national security interests and freedom of the press. The article suggests the media, through use of news satellites, could "blow the cover on covert US activities around the world." [redacted] 25X1

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Attachment

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Satellites May Give Journalists Powerful Tool, Lead to Showdown on National Security Issue

By Laurie McGinley
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

WASHINGTON—For the press, it's the ultimate telephoto lens. For governments, it may be the ultimate headache in controlling information.

Commercial space surveillance, once used almost exclusively by farmers, urban planners and geologists, has begun giving journalists entree into inaccessible and restricted areas. With remote-sensing technology improving rapidly, analysts say, news organizations in years to come are certain to step up their use of "space-cams" to reach far-flung spots and to unearth state secrets.

Media Eye in the Sky

The journalistic advantages of using these civilian satellites are obvious. In many instances, including the Falklands War and the U.S. invasion of Grenada, the press was forced to rely heavily on official government accounts. But scoops from space also raise a host of thorny questions—and the specter of a collision between national security interests and the First Amendment. "There is no question," says Rep. George Brown, (D., Calif.), a member of the House space science subcommittee and the Select Committee on Intelligence, "that you would run up against some very serious problems very quickly."

Two commercial reconnaissance satellite systems already orbit the globe—the new, French SPOT satellite, and the older American standby, Landsat—and both made a big splash this spring by supplying the first news pictures of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Many analysts predict that it's just a matter of time before the media launch their own eye in the sky.

The Two Satellites

	SPOT	LANDSAT
Resolution	Objects larger than 30 feet	Objects larger than 100 feet
Prices for images	$155 to $2,550	$50 to $3,300
Coverage	1,300 square miles	13,000 square miles
Special features	Pointable lens, stereoscopic image	More spectral bands for agricultural, geologic use
Launched	Feb. 21, 1986	July 23, 1972
Orbit	Polar, 493 mi. from earth	Polar, 438 mi. from earth

"It's bound to happen," asserts Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency during the Carter Administration.

John McWethy, who covers national security issues for ABC News, agrees. "Sooner or later," he says, "a conglomerate of U.S. news organizations will try to put up its own satellite."

In the meantime, the media is relying more heavily on existing satellites, which use sensors to measure the sun's reflections on the earth and then transmit the images to earth-receiving stations. ABC News has used Landsat pictures for a number of stories in the past two years, including one on the closed Soviet city of Murmansk. The 14-year-old satellite system, which was built and operated by the U.S. government, gradually is being turned over to a private company, Earth Observation Satellite Co., jointly owned by Hughes Aircraft Co. and RCA Corp. and based in Landover, Md.

National Security Implications

More exciting from the news media's standpoint is Systeme Probatoire d'Observation de la Terre (SPOT), a satellite owned by government and private interests in France, Belgium and Sweden. Launched in February, it can detect images as small as half the size of a tennis court—a quantum leap over Landsat. By using SPOT, Mr. McWethy says, "we will be able to monitor military-force buildups at sea, on the ground, anywhere in the world with great precision." The implications for national security, he adds, are "horrendous."

Paul Stares, a research associate at the Brookings Institution who specializes in the military aspects of space, calls the potential impact of an increased media presence in space "absolutely mind-boggling." Eventually, he notes, news organizations could corrobate or refute information put out by governments, peek in on activities behind the Iron Curtain and possibly "blow the cover on covert U.S. activities around the world."

What if, for example, a satellite news photograph revealed a military buildup on one side or the other of the Iran-Iraq border? Or threw cold water on a White House charge that the Soviets were installing missiles in Nicaragua? Or showed a U.S. fleet assembling off the coast of Libya? "It will be one more way," says David Martin, who covers the Pentagon for CBS News, "for the cat to get out of the bag."

Such developments, to be sure, are down the road. Building and launching a "mediasat" would cost hundreds of millions of dollars and take several years; there aren't any plans on the drawing boards.

Satellites Have Drawbacks

Using SPOT and Landsat, meanwhile, has its own drawbacks, from the media's viewpoint. Both systems produced Chernobyl pictures just hours after the images were recorded, but the companies say they don't plan such quick turnaround often because it holds up other work. The normal turnaround is several weeks—enough for almost any story to cool off. Moreover, even with SPOT's superior resolution, it is often hard for the untrained eye to know what the pictures show. "You have to be told what you are looking at," says Mr. Martin, who expresses some skepticism about using satellites as a news tool. "They look like abstract art."

Nevertheless, the intelligence community already is quietly fretting about journalistic snooping from space, although officials at the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency refuse to discuss it publicly in any detail. CIA director William Casey, in an April speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, voiced some concern, but said he expected the media would eventually loft a satellite and added, "We try to live with it and we do what we can to protect our interests."

For their part, the news media are working to try to ensure that the same free-press principles that apply on earth also apply in space. Anyone in the U.S. who wants to build and launch a satellite must get licenses from the government, and a media task force organized by the Radio-Television News Directors Association wants to make sure that such licenses can be denied only in the case of a clear danger to U.S. security. Members of the task force include the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the National Association of Broadcasters and the American Newspaper Publishers Association.

"We want to be free to take pictures whenever and wherever we can," says Mark Brender, head of the task force and an assignment editor for ABC News. Mr. Brender, who is exploring the economic feasibility of the media launching their own satellite, notes that if U.S. regulation of domestic satellites proves to be too onerous, news organizations always have the option of going abroad for their satellite pictures, or for the satellites themselves.

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